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Education Committee Public Hearing
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Supporting Bills: HB6556, HB6557, HB6558, SB977

Co-Chairs Senator McCrory and Representative Sanchez, Ranking Member Representative McCarty and Senator Berthel, and other distinguished members of the Education Committee, my name is Hamish MacPhail and I am the Policy and Research Director of ConnCAN.

Today, I am here to testify in support of: HB6556, HB6557, HB6558 and SB977

HB:6556

ConnCAN is in support for HB6556: An Act Addressing Issues Created by the Covid-19 Pandemic on Public Education in Connecticut. ConnCAN believes the legislation would be strengthened by including clear definitions of student engagement and student disengagement (proposed language attached in Appendix A of this testimony)

COVID-19 restructured the delivery of education in striking ways. Many districts had to make difficult decisions to balance health, safety and academic learning. Layered on top of COVID-19, Connecticut has maintained sizable opportunity gaps for generations. These gaps have disproportionately impacted students of color and are likely to increase due to the pandemic. To come out of this crisis stronger, Connecticut must have an all-hands-on-deck mentality for mitigating learning loss. Simply ensuring that schools remain open for in-person learning is insufficient. Additional support over the next two years must supplement any education model where inequities persist.

ConnCAN believes that Connecticut must mitigate learning loss by:

1. Accurately measuring learning loss through statewide Spring 2021 assessments;
2. Creating a portfolio of mitigation strategies, including: afterschool, summer and small group tutoring, including learning pods at no/low cost; and
3. Ensuring districts have the resources and flexibility to adjust length of school day/ school year to meet the immediate academic needs of their students.

Accurately Measuring Learning Loss

To solve a problem, one must first understand the size, shape and direction of that problem. For Connecticut to tackle learning loss, we must collectively understand:

- which students are most impacted;
- where those students attend school; and
- the depth of the loss.

Connecticut should use its existing SBAC and SAT assessment systems in Spring 2021 to measure academic achievement, growth and opportunity gaps. We must resist pressures to waive assessments for any reason. Without actionable data on student achievement, Connecticut will fly blind when our students and families need clear-eyed guidance more than ever.

Mitigation Strategies

Once we understand what learning loss looks like, Connecticut schools must implement a portfolio of mitigation strategies. These interventions should target students that require the most support, and should be widely available. Interventions include:

- expanded after-school academic programming;
- community-based learning pods;
- formal summer academic programming;
- high-dosage, small group tutoring; and
- additional in-school interventions and opportunities for small group instruction.

Connecticut should leverage federal funds to incentivize districts to deepen their investment in these mitigation strategies over the next two academic years (at least). We must have an all-hands-on-deck approach to supporting accelerated student growth.

Any mitigation strategy should include periodic assessments to track progress and make shifts in strategy, based on results.

Resources and Flexibility

During crises, districts need to have additional flexibilities to meet the needs of their students. For example, Connecticut waived the 180-day requirement so that districts could better plan and prepare their educators for the realities of distance learning. For the recovery ahead, districts should be able to extend the school day and academic year to increase learning time for students.

The State Department of Education should make resources available to districts to alter their school day and school year. Resources could include;

- technical support to analyze and determine how to restructure the school day/school year; and
- matching funds for additional school staff capacity;

Strengthening the legislation

HB6556 includes guidance on reducing student disengagement, yet the term is not fully defined in the legislation. ConnCAN recommends including proposed language (Appendix A: attached) to HB6556 to strengthen its functionality.

The Risk of Inaction

If Connecticut fails to address learning loss in a strategic fashion, our students will never recover. The losses will compound each year and we'll lose a generation of students. The impact will not be equitable, either. Students of color will experience greater losses and will have less resources available to them to mitigate those losses. The opportunity gap will expand, and Connecticut's education system will suffer.

We must address learning loss now, no matter what it exposes about the challenges of educating in a COVID-19 world. Our students depend on our guidance and support to become successful, self-sufficient adults. Without our honesty, students will unknowingly fall behind. That's simply unfair.

Let's build an equitable Connecticut in a post-COVID world. It will take assessment, mitigation strategies, resources and flexibility, but we'll be better positioned to tackle large-scale challenges in our future.

HB:6557

ConnCAN is in support for HB6557: An Act Concerning Social and Emotional Learning

This past year has been challenging for our young people. They had to rapidly change their entire lives, learning from home rather than school, seeing family members virtually rather than at gatherings, and in some cases, experiencing loss and financial hardship. Our students have been deeply impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and will have to receive increased social and emotional support to get back on the right track.

HB6557 is a sorely needed first step in deepening the social and emotional supports available within schools. Specifically, HB6557 sets ratio limits for school counselor, social worker, family therapist and school psychologist. That way, each school hires, trains and supports a mental health workforce able to meet the needs of the student population.

Additionally, HB6557 completes a mental health audit for all Connecticut students, which helps professionals set a baseline for student need. Our students will benefit from meeting, learning about and receiving support from mental health professionals. Finally, this work will help support student academic goals and outcomes as they will be in a better mental state to access lessons.

HB:6558

ConnCAN is in support for HB6558: An Act Concerning Issues Related to the Provision of Early Childhood Education and Services in Connecticut

At the beginning of the pandemic, our early childhood service providers were a lifeline for families struggling to balance work, safety and family obligations. They were the first to reopen and the last to leave. Additionally, early childhood educators are among the most underpaid in the education profession. HB6558 provides significant support to early childhood educators by making loan forgiveness and tax credits available.

Loan forgiveness is already available to K-12 teachers and nonprofit employees. By expanding loan forgiveness to early childhood educators, they are more likely to enter and remain in the profession, which benefits children and service providers. Likewise, available tax credits provide incentives for educators to continue their education, as they receive greater benefits with a 4-year degree than a 2-year or certificate degree.

SB:977

ConnCAN is in support for SB977: An Act Concerning Virtual Learning

When schools shut down last March, Connecticut's school districts scrambled to meet the educational needs of students in a virtual setting. ConnCAN curated a comprehensive list of all virtual learning plans and found variability in style, quality and accessibility. And, as districts tested out new practices, those plans changed numerous times in the course of a few months. This process was frustrating for all stakeholders, but a lot of important lessons were learned as a result. SB977 takes those lessons and uses them to create a uniform set of guidelines for virtual learning. Also, the legislation provides professional development for teachers to deepen their virtual learning pedagogy and practice.

As Connecticut schools move back to an in-person setting, virtual learning will continue to play a periodic role in public education. By passing SB977, Connecticut students, families and teachers will have clarity on expectations and be more prepared to hit the ground running, rather than scramble in uncertainty.

About ConnCAN:

Founded in 2005, ConnCAN is leading an advocacy movement to ensure that all kids in The Constitution State have access to a high-quality education, regardless of their address.

Our work to improve education in Connecticut springs from our belief in the immense potential found within every child and our responsibility as citizen advocates to do everything we can to ensure we have an education system that lives up to this potential.

We strive to be resourceful and nimble as we advance the changes our kids deserve. We aim to see every win—and every setback—as an opportunity to learn what’s working today and envision what might be possible tomorrow. We know we don’t have all the answers and that we can only succeed by constantly testing our assumptions, working in close collaboration with others and investing in an inclusive culture enlivened by diverse viewpoints from across our state.

ConnCAN is a branch of [50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now](#).

Appendix A: Insert Language on Student Engagement for HB6556

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. (Effective July 1, 2021) (a) As used in this section:

(1) "Engaged student" means a student in grade K to 12, inclusive, who participates in 75% or more of learning opportunities whether in-person, hybrid or remote by (A) signing into lessons, (B) completing assignments, and (C) participating in learning tasks.

(2) "Disengaged student" means a student in grade K to 12, inclusive, who participates in less than 75% of learning opportunities whether in-person, hybrid or remote by (A) signing into lessons, (B) completing assignments, and (C) participating in learning tasks.

(3) "Community partner" means a provider of one or more of the following services to students, families or community members: (A) Primary medical or dental care, (B) mental health treatment and services, (C) academic enrichment activities, (D) programs designed to improve student attendance at school, (E) youth development programs, (F) parental involvement programs, (G) programs that provide assistance to students who are truant or who have been suspended or expelled, (H) youth and adult job training and career counseling services, (I) nutrition education, (J) adult education, (K) remedial education and enrichment activities, (L) legal services, or (M) any other relevant services or programs.

(b) For the fiscal years ending June 30, 2020, and June 30, 2021, the Department of Education shall establish a protocol for tracking student engagement, to be implemented uniformly by local and regional boards of education. Each local and regional board of education shall adopt and implement policies and procedures concerning students who have been identified as disengaged under the jurisdiction of such board of education. Said boards of education may utilize state and federal funds where available for the purposes of tracking student engagement and implementing strategies to mitigate disengagement. Such policies and procedures shall include, but need not be limited to, the following: increased access to interventionists, such as paraprofessionals, teacher aides, guidance counselors, and other support staff for each grade level to track engagement and provide targeted academic support for disengaged students; increased access to counselors and social workers; increased access to social emotional learning programs and professionals; peer-led professional development for teachers to improve student engagement; access to technological tools to enable teachers to monitor and improve student engagement; parent engagement tools; academic tutoring; and expanded access to college and career readiness services. Said boards shall also partner with community partners to provide assistance to students

identified as disengaged. Such assistance shall include, but need not be limited to, internet access, academic intervention and tutoring, employment, shelter, clothing, food and transportation.

(c) Not later than July 1, 2022, the Department of Education shall submit a report analyzing student engagement data and evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of mitigation strategies and any recommendations for legislation pertaining to student engagement to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes.

Statement of Purpose:

To secure the safety, education and social equity of children and learning in response to the pandemic.